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The Editor's Perspective

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The Editor's Perspective

IN THE PAST DECADE OR SO, historians have been paying a lot of attention to *memory*—or, more precisely, the way people remember the past. This attention actually follows the lead of regular citizens, for whom remembering the past has become a popular leisure time activity. Museum visits, genealogical investigation, ethnic celebrations, even reading popular biographies and watching The History Channel have gained increasing popularity in recent years.

We know, of course, that memory is not the same as history. I have kept a personal journal for most of the past two decades, and I'm reminded of the truth of that statement almost every time I go back and read a portion of it and realize, "that's not the way I remember that!" Most of us are aware, too, that although oral history can be an invaluable way to discover how people who are underrepresented in historical documents felt about the historical events they participated in, such memories are a notoriously *unreliable* guide to "what actually happened," how and why.

Yet the *way* we remember the past, whether accurately or not, is itself historically significant. We can learn a lot about what is important to the culture of a particular place and time by investigating the way people in that culture celebrated various anniversaries, such as centennials, what buildings they chose to preserve, and what they chose to display in museum exhibits. The ways that towns such as Pella or Decorah have celebrated their ethnic traditions have influenced the history of those towns as much as the ethnic heritage itself has.

Of course, one of the most popular historical events that American citizens mark in various ways in public memory is that great time of trial at the center of our history as a nation: the Civil War. Every summer, none of us is far from some Civil War battle re-enactment, and Civil War battlefields are popular tourist destinations. One might question how well either experience—carefully orchestrated battle re-enactments or just as

carefully groomed battlefields—conveys the chaos of the actual battlefield experience, yet preserving the public memory of those battles is historically important. Thus it is good to be reminded, as Timothy Smith does in this issue of the *Annals*, that the shaping force behind one of the most important Civil War battlefields, Shiloh National Military Park, was Iowan David Wilson Reed. To honor the comrades who fought with—and against—him at that battle, he established a site where visitors could retrace the battle and remember its significance.

All too often, however, the activities through which we remember the Civil War forget the group of American citizens perhaps most dramatically affected by the war: African Americans. Leslie Schwalm's article about the surprising prevalence of celebrations by African Americans in Iowa of the anniversary of emancipation from slavery helps us to remember that significant legacy of the war. I share the hope that Professor Schwalm expresses in the conclusion of her article: "As national debates over Civil War memory and the impact of slavery on contemporary race relations continue to evoke passionate arguments and shape public policy, perhaps Iowa's role in this national, regional, and local story will once again inspire public discourse, expressive culture, and a commitment to public history."

—Marvin Bergman, editor

Editor's note: In this space in the last issue, I promised you two more installments of Susan Lawrence's history of medicine in Iowa. Rest assured that those installments will indeed be forthcoming, but I have interrupted the series to bring you this issue focusing on the memory of the Civil War and the emancipation of slaves that it brought about.

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